

Minutes of a Meeting of the Standards Committee held in the John Meikle Room, The Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton TA1 1HE, on Wednesday, 24 January 2024 at 2.00 pm

Present:

Cllr John Bailey (Chair)
Cllr Brian Smedley (Vice-Chair)

Cllr Hugh Davies
Cllr Frances Nicholson
Paul Hooper
David Stripp

Cllr Martin Dimery
Alan Hemsley
Robin Horton

33 Apologies for Absence - Agenda Item 1

The Chair held a moment of reflection for former councillor and Standards Committee member Alan Gloak MBE.

There were no apologies for absence.

34 Declarations of Interest - Agenda Item 2

There were no declarations of interest.

35 Public Question Time - Agenda Item 3

No members of the public had registered to speak.

36 Minutes from the Previous Meeting and Action Sheet - Agenda Item 4

The Committee considered the action plan and noted the following:

Action 1.2 (Update on the recruitment of an additional Co-opted member)

It was explained that recruitment had been delayed, because of the need to concentrate on the current financial crisis, but was programmed for Spring 2024

Agreed: revised due date of 27 March 2024

Action 2.1 – Completed

Action 2.2 (P2 – Look at improving response levels to survey and uptake of Code of Conduct)

The Chair of P2 stated that nothing had been done as she felt it inappropriate to try and persuade city, town and parish councils to adopt a code the Committee could not agree upon, particularly as they could only recommend its adoption. **Agreed** P2 to discuss the issue and report back their thoughts at the next meeting.

Action 3 –(Officer Code of Conduct - Service Director to share with Union reps and update Committee)

This too had been delayed with the financial crisis. **Agreed** revised due date of 27 March 2024.

Action 4 (Code of Conduct complaints)

4.3 - Completed

4.4 – Two individual experiences of the complaint process to be used as test of complaints efficiency. P1 by 29 February 2024.

Resolved

That the minutes of the Standards Committee held on 25 October 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

37 Code of Conduct Complaints - Quarterly Update - Agenda Item 5

The Committee considered the quarterly update on Code of Conduct complaints and were advised that, after a peak of complaints in May, the numbers had now dropped down to a relatively stable average of 5 or 6 complaints a month. Around 75% of the complaints related to disrespect, bringing the council into disrepute and failure to disclose an interest.

80% of complaints were currently being acknowledged within the target of 5 working days. For Quarter 3 50% of complaints were responded to within the 20 days. The main reason for this was when further information or details were requested from either the complainant or the councillor and the subsequent delays in them responding, was out of the Council's control.

In response to questions the Monitoring Officer highlighted:

- The complaints process and who was notified of a complaint
- That whilst parish meetings, which did not have elected members and did not have to adopt a code of conduct, did not fall within his remit the Council would happily provide them with support and assistance in terms of governance matters.
- Political Leaders could be engaged with when dealing with complaints.
- Their hopes for rolling out code of conduct training for city, town and parish councils, in conjunction with both the Society for Local Council Clerks and the Somerset Association of Local Councils had not progressed as quickly as they'd wanted. They were now looking to provide support and training as part of their wider engagement with city, towns and parish councils over the devolution agenda.

The Committee noted the report and felt that it would be useful to:

- Have an indication, on the Code of Conduct complaints summary, where there is a particular delay, of the reasons for that delay or an indication that we are waiting for other people to respond.
- After a full year of complaints to look at the trends and causes of complaints to see what could be done to reduce them.
- The pie chart of the code cited in complaints to include the number of complaints in each segment.
- To receive a quarter 4 report at the March meeting and the full year's overview at the first meeting of the new municipal year.

38 Register of Gifts and Hospitality - Agenda Item 6

Members considered the Council's response to the Committee's recommendations on gifts and hospitality. Although having a range of views on the level at which declarations ought to be made, they accepted that anything other than the current £50, used in the LGA model code of conduct, would likely receive an unfavourable response.

Whilst they acknowledged some of the points raised during the Council debate they also felt that some comments highlighted the need for member training on the code and how to declare gifts and hospitality. They agreed that this, and whether any amendments to the forms were needed, should be considered at their first meeting in the new municipal year.

Resolved

To acknowledge the referral back from Full Council and focus on further work that could be done through the Monitoring Officer to promote the current requirements and consider any further work that could be done to embed these i.e. guidance and training.

39 Work Programme and Actions - Agenda Item 7

(The meeting ended at 3.38 pm)

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CHAIR